

II. Process Used to Develop the QEP

A. Historical Perspective of Distance Education at SSCC

Approaching distance education cautiously, SSCC offered its first online class in Fall 1999. Though the College did not conduct a formal assessment to determine a need for online classes, the use of online environments for education was a widely accepted practice. Online classes seemed an obvious and logical extension of the accepted mission of the community college: to provide the broadest possible access to educational opportunity.

SSCC's first online class began as a variation of the "Field of Dreams" scenario. An early adopter wondered if her students would be interested in and would use online technology. With "a 'let's try it and see what happens' attitude" and support from a Title III grant, the instructor built it, BIO 101 Introduction to Biology, and they did indeed come. For a substantial time period, this class was the only online class offered. Participation in this class demonstrated an interest in online classes among the student population.

Other online classes emerged for different reasons. Two computer science classes became part of the early online curriculum and were taught on a self-paced, tutorial basis. Over time, the instructor began to use the Internet to communicate with his students. He never intended to develop an online class, but, as his day-to-day use of the Internet increased, he recognized that an online class had evolved.

The popularity of the early online classes gradually motivated faculty to develop other online offerings. Online classes were increasingly seen as a viable alternative for students. The administration and faculty realized that online education could extend and enhance outreach to students. The movement toward online classes proceeded in a piecemeal fashion. It was faculty-driven with administration providing support for individual faculty members who elected to develop online classes in their teaching disciplines. With an occasional exception, faculty members who taught online classes were the same as those who taught the traditional on-campus classes.

From the beginning, SSCC asserted that it did not expect online classes to be the predominant means by which instruction would be delivered or that online classes would ever comprise more than a small percentage of the total number of classes offered each semester. Further, it was not the intention of the College for online delivery to be the only means by which a student could take a given course.

For the most part, an online class was intended to be an additional option. SSCC also had no plans to use online classes to extend its reach beyond its geographic service area. The use of online classes was meant for the Tuscaloosa/West Alabama students whom the College was already assigned to serve. Online classes targeted those students and potential students who found access to the College prevented or hindered by constraints of time and place. SSCC also expected that the majority of students who enrolled in online classes would also be enrolled in traditional on-campus classes.

Gradually, the number of online classes increased. By Fall 2002, there were seven separate courses being offered online. A total of twenty-three (23) credit hours was available for students through these courses. In Fall 2002, there were 295 students enrolled in these seven courses.

The College adopted WebCT as its initial course management system, changing to Blackboard in 2005. It appointed a member of the faculty as Coordinator of Distance Education, gave that individual a reduced teaching load, and established a team to guide the development of its online offerings. As online learning efforts evolved, the College provided notification to the Commission on Colleges (COC) and secured its approval in compliance with the guidelines for substantive change.

SSCC faculty and administrators also tried to be informed about and follow best practices in the field. SSCC gleaned from the experience and expertise of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the COC as well as other schools and state systems which have moved forward with online courses. The aim was to try to "do it right," especially regarding issues such as student learning, equivalency of course quality, student services and library/learning resources, test security, access to faculty, etc.

While SSCC did not *expect experienced face-to-face faculty to magically begin to function well in the online environment* (Smith, 2005), the College did not approach faculty training in a systematic fashion. There was no requirement that faculty be trained at all, except the practical requirement of having the ability to operate the course management system in order to be able to teach an online class. The training was essentially the *fragmented workshop programs or one-shot conferences on technology* which Allen Rowe (2002) found characteristic of many institutions. Generally, faculty learned the basic operation of the course management system in one-on-one sessions with the Coordinator of Distance Education, with other faculty

members who had previous experience, or at professional development workshops offered by the College. Similarly, there was little effort to control enrollment in online classes. Any eligible student could enroll in an online class, regardless of whether the student had the necessary aptitude, skills, abilities, or resources.

B. QEP Development

SSCC took the first formal step on its QEP journey in February 2006. At a college-wide convocation, the President and Chief Instructional Officer explained the QEP, outlined the process by which the QEP would be developed, and stressed the paramount importance of its impact on student learning. At the convocation, a large QEP sign was presented, and the letter "Q" was unveiled. This sign and others identical to it were displayed prominently around the College to keep faculty and staff reminded of the QEP, its development, and the important role they were to play in the process. The remaining letters of the sign would be unveiled at strategic milestones in the QEP journey.

The Chief Instructional Officer of the institution, Dean of Instructional Services, Camille Cochrane, and the Director of Planning, Carole Johnson, met in focus groups with members of the faculty and staff, with students, and with members of the community, to explain the QEP process and to solicit their ideas, suggestions and recommendations. As a result of this initiative, over one hundred suggestions and recommendations were submitted regarding the potential content of the QEP.

In September 2006, a team was appointed by the President of the College to condense this information into potential topics for the QEP. The members of this group represented each of the major functional areas of the institution: Instructional Services, Student Services, and Business Services (See QEP Topics Team, Table 1, page 5.). Dr. Donald Crump, former member of the COC staff, served as a consultant for this team (See Crump résumé, Appendix H.).

2008 Quality Enhancement Plan

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